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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of a survey to determine the effects, if any, that experience in playgroups had upon children of varying social class backgrounds in differing areas within the United Kingdom. The project aimed at answering two major questions: (1) Did teachers perceive differences in first year infant school children that they could attribute to previous attendance at playgroups, and, (2) If the teachers did see differences, what, according to their views, was the nature of the differences? A questionnaire dealing with observable differences in children who had/had not attended playgroups was constructed. Investigated were the effects of playgroups on socialization, motivation, language development, playing, intellectual and emotional development, motor skills, communicative skills, creative skills, pre-reading skills, aggressiveness, organizational ability, discipline, and other characteristics. Factors considered in choosing the sample were location of the schools (inner cities, urban areas, country districts), nature of housing, and estimated social class of the children. Questionnaires were sent to the selected schools, and upon return 92% were followed up by personal interviews. Results are listed for each questionnaire item. A conclusion briefly discusses the relationships between the region, housing, and social class of children and the varying responses of teachers. (SB)

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"A STUDY OF THE VIEWS OF TEACHERS OF FIRST YEAR INFANT SCHOOL CHILDREN CONCERNING THE EFFECTS ON THE LANGUAGE AND SOCIALISATION OF CHILDREN WHO HAVE PREVIOUSLY ATTENDED PLAYGROUPS"

REPORT TO THE S S R C : H R 3813/2

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PS 008746

"I keep six honest serving men,
They taught me all I know,
Their names are What and Why and When,
And How and Where and Who."

(Kipling 'The Elephant's Child')

JUNE 1976

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The intention of the research survey was to ascertain the precise nature, if any, that experience in playgroups had upon children of varying social class backgrounds in differing areas within the United Kingdom. The research builds on some early informal work by the researchers in the area of the development of communication in pre-school children. The researchers, in considering the societal and psychological aspects of communicative development, were troubled by the almost total lack of precise information about the effects on the language and socialisation of children of such pre-school institutions as playgroups. They would not appear to be alone as the Bullock Report (13. 1-13.3) contains a statement of the expressed aims of the playgroup movement but makes no attempt to assess the effects of playgroups on the development of children as they go on to their infant schools. The report rather assumes that the aims are met. The project examined the effects of playgroups from one point of view only, namely, as the teachers perceived the effect in children in their first year of statuatory state education.

The aim of the project was to investigate two major hypotheses:

1. do teachers perceive differences - linguistic, developmental, behavioural etc - in first year infant school children, which could be attributed by the teachers to previous attendance at playgroups?
2. if the teachers did see differences, what, in the views of the teachers, was the nature of these differences?

A questionnaire was prepared asking a number of questions related to these general areas (see Appendix I). The results of the questionnaires were processes on an IBM 370 computer using the SSPS survey research programme.

SECTION 1 : AN ANALYSIS OF THE NATURE OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The first two questions on the questionnaire were to ascertain whether the teachers knew which of their children had attended playgroups, and whether they had been able to find out by observing the child's behaviour, or whether they had been told by a parent, a child or the school etc.

Questions 3, 4 and 5 were concerned with the general area of what effect playgroups might have had upon the behaviour of children.

Questions 6 and 7 were to ascertain whether the background of children who had attended playgroups was in any way different in either age or parental factors to that of the children who had not attended playgroups.

Questions 8 and 9 were concerned with more open-ended questions regarding the child's socialisation, whereas linguistic and intellectual development had already been assessed in question 4.

Question 10 was concerned with determining the nature of the playgroups which the children had previously attended.

Question 11 and 12 were concerned with whether there was such a thing as a 'playgroup child' and how the 'playgroup child' if so-called could be described.

Questions 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17 were concerned with personal details and attitudes of the teachers that filled in the questionnaire.

Question 18 was a free response question asking teachers to comment on any issues which they thought had not been covered in the remainder of the questionnaire and generally to voice any opinions as to the nature of the research.

SECTION 2 : SAMPLING

There were four major variables manipulated in choosing the precise nature of the samples.

Category 1 was concerned with schools in inner city areas. To get a wide range of schools, schools were chosen from (a) an industrial city (Sheffield), (b) London (an inner London borough), and (c) a non-industrialised provincial town (Norwich).

The second example of this factor was those children in urban areas. Again three categories were selected - (a) an industrial city (Sheffield), (b) London (an outer London borough), and (c) a non-industrialised provincial town (Norwich).

The third example of this factor were schools in country districts - (a) a non-commuting area (North Wales), and (b) a commuting area (Hertfordshire).

Another major factor investigated was the nature of housing. Four categories of housing were considered in Sheffield -

(a) old established council housing
(b) new or recent council housing
(c) old established private housing
(d) new or recent private housing

Another major factor considered was the estimated social class of children attending the schools, based on the location of the school in a particular area. This was established by considering the 1971 demographic analysis obtained from the general census. The cateogries obtained in this study were Sheffield working class and Sheffield middle class areas. Each one of the fourteen categories had ten teachers making a total of 140 teachers interviewed in conjunction with the survey.

Two types of sampling were employed. In London, North Wales, Hertfordshire, and Norwich a random stratified sample was obtained on the basis of local knowledge in consultation with the local Director of Education. In Sheffield a blanket survey was done, approaching all of the 119 schools in the infant or primary school category. The response rate in Sheffield was a startingly high 87.4% (104 responses), after a second follow-up request for completed questionnaires.

SECTION 3 : METHOD

Questionnaires were sent out to all the proposed schools early in October with a request that these should be returned within a week to ten days. The questionnaires were then analysed and 92% of them were followed up by a personal individual interview with the member of staff that had filled in the form. The interviews conducted did not follow any rigidly fixed or suggested order of questioning. The interviewer responded with appropriate questions where necessary, and the interviewer was merely concerned with obtaining fuller details on the questionnaire, and also the teachers subjective view as to the nature of the school and the surrounding catchment area. The field-work concerned with the survey was conducted within the period 1st - 15th December 1975.

SECTION 4 : DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

Question 1: (Do you know which of your children have attended playgroups?)
There was no significant difference between any of the scores, with the exception of inner Sheffield and Sheffield working class area, on the number of teachers who knew which of their pupils had attended playgroups: - 116 out of 140 (82.9%). Sheffield inner areas and Sheffield working class areas were significantly different, with only 50% and 40% respectively knowing which of their children had attended playgroups.

Question 2: (How do you know?) (told by parent)
Section A: There were significant differences between most of the schools surveyed as to whether the teachers had been told by the parents whether their child had been to playgroups - 65 out of 140 (46.4%). Notably low in this category were inner Norwich, inner Sheffield, and Sheffield working class area.

Section B: (told by child) There was a wide range of variation but no significant differences between all the areas - 72 out of 140 (51.4%). Notably low in this category were inner Norwich, and inner Sheffield. Notably high in this category was outer Sheffield.

Section C: (told by playgroups) Again there were no significant differences - 54 out of 140 (38.6%). Both inner Sheffield and Sheffield working class area were the lowest.

Section D: (told by school or head teacher) Again no regular profile emerged - 42 out of 140 (30%).

Section E: (asked child) There were significant differences between the schools involved, with inner London and outer London being the lowest and outer Sheffield being the highest - 42 out of 140 (30%).

Section F: (asked parent) Relatively low throughout all the schools - 23 out of 140 (16.4%).

Section G: (other means) 8 out of 140 (5.7%).

Question 3: (Do you think that playgroups influence the behaviour of children?)

All categories of respondents agreed significantly that playgroups influenced the behaviour of children - 88.6%.

Question 4: (What effects do playgroups have on .....?)

Section A: - Socialisation

Again there was no significant difference between the schools. 88.6% thought that pre-school playgroups improved the child's socialisation; 10% thought that the child's socialisation was not influenced by pre-school playgroups; whereas 1.4% thought that the child's socialisation had actually been hindered by their experience in pre-school playgroups.

Section B: - Child's Understanding of School

The child's understanding of school was thought to be improved by 59.3%. No difference for 30.7% and 10% thought that the child's understanding of school had been hindered. There were, however, significant differences between the schools on these factors, with inner London and Hertfordshire, and Sheffield d with new private housing being the most enthusiastic and with North Wales being the least enthusiastic about this aspect of improvement.

Section C: - Motivation in School

With 49.3% seeing this as being improved and 47.8% seeing no difference, and 2.9% seeing this hindered by attendance at pre-school playgroups.

Section D: - Language Development

There were no significant differences between the varying samples, with 81.4% seeing language development enhanced by attendance at pre-school playgroups and 18.6% seeing no difference. No respondents thought that language development had been impaired by attendance at pre-school playgroups.

Section E: - Playing

With 80% of teachers seeing this improved, 17.9% seeing no difference and 2.1% seeing this hindered by attendance at pre-school playgroups.

Section F: - Intellectual Development

Significant differences between most of the areas sampled, with 45% seeing that this had been improved, 52.9% seeing no difference, and 2.1% seeing that this had actually been impaired.

Section G: - Emotional Development

Again wide differences of opinion from the different areas, with 65% seeing emotional development improved, 33.6% seeing no difference, and 1.4% seeing this impeded by attendance at pre-school playgroups.

Section H: - Motor Skills

No significant differences between different areas of this variable, with 74.3% seeing an improvement, 25% seeing no difference, and 0.7% seeing this variable impaired by attendance at pre-school playgroups.

Section I: - Pre-reading Skills

A tremendous variation between the replies from different areas, with 41.4% seeing this improved, and 56.5% seeing no difference, and 2.1% seeing these skills impaired.

Section J: - Communicative Skills

No significant difference between the different areas, with 87.1% seeing these improved, and 22.9% seeing no difference. No respondent thought that communicative skills had been impaired by attendance at pre-school playgroups.

Section K: - Creative Skills

Again no significant differences between areas found, with 66.4% seeing this improved, 32.9% seeing no difference, and 0.7% seeing an actual impairment.

Among other effects that playgroups had on pupils was the general area of self-confidence mentioned by 11% of respondents.

Question 5: (Are children who have attended playgroup.....?)

Section A: - more/less clumsy

Respondents were asked to assess specific properties attached to the children. 35% thought that children who had attended playgroups were less clumsy, 17.9% thought that children were more clumsy.

Section B: - more/less amenable to classroom discipline

45% of respondents thought children were more amenable to classroom discipline, 17.9% thought children were less amenable to classroom discipline.

Section C: - more/less likely to throw tantrums

15% thought children were more likely to throw tantrums and 32.1% thought children were less likely to throw tantrums.

Section D: - more/less aggressive

20% thought that children were more aggressive, 30.7% thought that they were less aggressive.

Section E: - more/less able to organise themselves without supervision

59.3% thought children were better able to organise themselves without supervision, whereas 3.6% thought they were less able.

Section F: - more/less continent

40.7% thought the children were more continent, and 0.7% thought they were less continent.

Section G: - more/less mature

57.9% thought that pre-school playgroup children were more mature, 0.7% thought they were less mature.

Section H: - more/less interested in school

57.9% thought that children were more interested in school, 0.7% thought that pre-school playgroup children were less interested in school than their peers.

Section I: - more/less happy in school

57.1% thought children were more happy in school, whereas 2.1% thought children were less happy in school than their peers.

Section J: - made friends more/less easily

72.1% thought that playgroup children made friends more easily, whereas 2.1% thought that playgroup children made friends less easily.

Section K:

Among other comments that teachers made was that playgroup children had a better understanding of interacting with adults.

Question 6: (On entry to school, are playgroup children younger, older, or the same age as non-playgroup children?)
9.3% of teachers reported that playgroup children were younger at admission to infant or first schools. 90.7% reported no significant difference in ages.

Question 7: (Do playgroup children differ from their peers...?)
Teachers reported that playgroup children differed from their peers in terms of parental background and social class in 46.4% of cases. 25% reported that playgroup children differed from their peers in terms of parental education, 33.6% reported that playgroup children differed from their peers in respect of where the children lived. 41.4% reported that playgroup children differed from their peers in respect of where the child's mother worked. 10.7% thought that playgroup children's parents differed from other parents in 10.7% of cases, notably social class.

Question 8: (Do playgroup children react differently from their peers in being disciplined?)
47.1% thought that playgroup children reacted differently from their peers in being disciplined.

Question 9: (Do playgroup children integrate with non-playgroup children well, or do they maintain themselves as a group?)
15.7% of teachers thought that playgroup children did not integrate well with non-playgroup children, as they tended to maintain themselves as a group, whereas 84.3% of teachers thought that playgroup children integrated as well or better than other children.

Question 10: (What can you tell us about the type of playgroups from which the children come?)
Section A: Teachers reported that only 19.3% of playgroups that were feeding into other schools had qualified teachers running or helping in the organisation of it.

Section B: 47.9% reported that the playgroup was a 5 day a week playgroup.

Section C: 66.4% of teachers reported that the playgroup was a voluntary playgroup.

Section D: 52.9% reported that the playgroups were approved by the local education authority.

Section E: Only 43% of teachers stated that the playgroups were part of an EPA scheme, all occurring in inner city areas.

Section F: 32.1% reported that the playgroup was run in conjunction with some other organisation, particularly local churches.

Section G: The average age at which children were accepted to playgroups was just under 3 years (2 years 11 months).

Section H: 70% replied that the playgroup was popular.

Section I: 60.7% reported that the playgroup had been established more than 3 years.

Section J: 9.3% reported that the playgroups met some time during school holidays.

Section K: Only 17.1% of teachers thought that the children were taught at playgroups.

Question 11: (In your opinion, can a child in school be categorised as a 'playgroup child.')
Only 24.3% of teachers thought that a child in school could be categorised as a 'playgroup child.'

Question 13: Teachers were asked to respond on a seven point attitude scale, from +3 Strongly in Favour to -3 Strongly Against Playgroups. There were significant variations in teachers attitudes. The overall impression was that most teachers were in favour of playgroups (+2).

Question 14: 69.3% of teachers stated that they had or would send their own children to playgroups.

Question 15: However, only 44.3% had either or would be prepared to organise a playgroup.

Question 16: Whereas 65% of teachers stated that they would be prepared to help at a playgroup.

Question 17: This revealed large variations between different areas sampled, with regard to the length of teaching experience that teachers

had. The average length of teaching experience was 11.4 years, with teachers having had longer experience being centred predominantly in the middle class areas.

SECTION 5 : CONCLUSION

This concludes the specific analysis of the results. However, there are perhaps some wider or more general factors which need to be discussed. One of the most surprising findings was that there was an overall correlation between length of teaching experience and the degree of positive attitude towards playgroups. Other significant factors were as follows. Teachers in urban and commuting areas were significantly more positive towards playgroups and also thought them to be more beneficial to their pupils. Teachers in inner city areas and in non-commuting areas tended to be less positive and less enthusiastic about the effects pre-school playgroups had upon the child's linguistic and social abilities.

Again in considering the other major factor manipulated: housing, a similar trend emerged in that in predominantly council house catchment areas for schools teachers were again less positive about the pre-school playgroups; many merely describing them as 'qualified child-minders.' Whereas in the private sectors, particularly in schools serving well-established private housing estates, the teachers were unanimous about the positive effects of pre-school playgroups.

A third factor taken into consideration was the difference between schools in predominantly working class areas or predominantly middle class areas, where perhaps it might be thought that children had more to gain from pre-school playgroups, the attitude was significantly less favourable toward pre-school playgroups, and also the positive effects of pre-school playgroup attendance were minimised.

There appeared to be no significant differences between regions. The major differences tended to come down to those of social class, as either directly monitored or indirectly monitored, such as housing and the difference between inner and outer city areas. North Wales is, however, a notable exception. We think that this is mainly due to the

relatively low incidence of pre-school playgroups, because of the low population density in the predominantly agricultural areas inland and the highly dense coastal resorts. However, even allowing for the wide variations in response from teachers, there is certainly agreement that attendance at pre-school playgroups is beneficial in a number of important areas, such as language ability and socialisation and certainly does no harm in most of the other factors considered. In making this ad hoc judgment themselves teachers seem to consciously recognise this by holding positive attitudes towards the notion of pre-school playgroups.

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